

To Plant or not to Plant... Roadside Landscaping & Safety

We all love the beauty of the woods, with their serene calm, birds chirping, bees buzzing, and wind whispering through the tree tops. And we want to be sensitive to our environment, and to the people who live alongside the road. We also want to be sensitive to those who use the road.

Plantings near a road can affect the safety of people who use the road. So we need to think about where landscaping works, and where it doesn't. Too close to the road just doesn't work.

When a vehicle leaves the road, any obstacles it hits can cause major vehicle damage and injury to anyone in it. A roadside free of fixed objects reduces crash severity. Simple property damage or a serious injury or fatality? Landscaping that limits visibility or is a roadside obstruction can make the difference. That includes trees, large shrubs, fencing, rocks, trellises, and other structures.

Of the roughly 40,000 fatalities each year in roadway crashes nationwide, about one-third are single vehicle run-off-the-road crashes. There are many reasons:

Driver fatigue	Inattention
Excessive speed	Drugs/alcohol
Roadway conditions	Collision avoidance
Vehicle failure	Poor visibility

It only takes a little space to create a safety area or “**clear zone**”. That allows for the mistakes we all make. With speed limits of 35-mph or less, the clear zone is only 10 feet. For high-volume 50-mph roadways, it will increase up to 20 feet. By keeping that area clear of obstacles, your son or daughter are much more likely to come home from that moment of inattention!

Landscaping at the Crossroads...Intersections

Drivers need to see approaching vehicles or those pulling out at intersections. If things limit sight distance, a serious collision is much more likely. Skagit County Code states; “On a corner lot...nothing shall be erected, placed, planted...to impair vision between ...2 ½ feet and 10 feet above the...streets within a triangle formed by the road right-of-way lines...30 feet from the point of intersection.

The choice is clear...

Clear intersection sight distances and obstruction free roadsides increase safety.

We can reserve landscaping to the areas a bit further out. Then all we have to worry about is maintenance. But what and where is another story...

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Questions about this article, or any of the series, or on other topics related to County Roads, may be directed either to your County Engineer, or to Al King, P.E., County Road Administration Board, Olympia, at Al@CRAB.Wa.Gov.